What makes a Woman CHOOSE SUCH A LIFE ?

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And This Is Our Reward

No. 25

M. Lachance Sm

Why the Knights of Columbus Advertise Catholic Faith

The reason is simple. We Catholics want our non-Catholic friends and neighbors to know us as we really are and not as we are some times mistakenly represented.

We are confident that when our religious Faith is better understood by those who do not share it, mutual understanding will promote the good-will which is so necessary in a predominantly Christian country whose government is designed to serve all the people—no matter how much their religious convictions may differ.

American Catholics are convinced that as the teachings of Christ widely and firmly take hold of the hearts and conduct of our people, we shall remain free in the sense that Christ promised (John VIII, 31-38), and in the manner planned by the Founding Fathers of this republic.

Despite the plainly stated will of the Good Shepherd that there be "one fold and one shepherd," the differences in the understanding of Christ's teaching are plainly evident. It has rightfully been called "the scandal of a divided Christianity."

If there is anything which will gather together the scattered flock of Christ, it is the nationwide understanding of the Savior, what He did and how He intended mankind to benefit by the Redemption.

To this end, we wish our fellow-Americans to become acquainted with the teachings of Christ as the Catholic Church has faithfully presented them, since the day the apostles invaded the nations of the world in willing and courageous obedience to Christ's command: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations . . ." (Matt. XXVIII, 19).

SUPREME COUNCIL
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Religious Information Bureau
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I CAN TELL YOU
all about Catholic Nuns

Have you ever wondered about Catholic nuns? Judging from my experience, at some time or other, people who are unacquainted with Catholic nuns wonder about them.

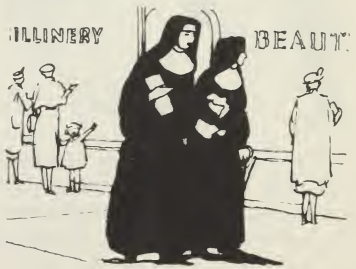
You may see us moving quietly and efficiently in and out of hospital rooms or you may pass us on the street, as we go modestly on errands of mercy, teaching and social service. And you wonder...

Perhaps you may be struck by our peaceful and contented faces, or our unusual garb. You may recall some of the revolting tales that are sometimes whispered about us. You wonder... perhaps with a sigh of pity.

I am a Catholic nun, and I know that on buses and trains, on the street and in stores, nuns are a source of unbounded and often poorly-disguised interest to many, old and young alike.

"Look, mama! What are them?" shouts Junior, pointing a stubby finger at some nuns who, until then, were quite unaware of the interest they had awakened. They smile good-naturedly as Junior's mother murmurs an embarrassed apology even while she secretly longs to hear the answer to her son's shrill question, "What are them?"

Perhaps you, like Junior's mother, would also like to know something about a nun's life. Well, to begin with, it certainly is different. Let's start with externals. Even a casual glance at nuns convinces you that they are not concerned about the "new look". They flash no costume jewelry; but their plain gold or silver ring proclaims that they are dedicated to Christ.



Utterly disregardful of modern fashions, nuns wear clothes designed to cover but not to flatter them. This is not so strange, though. Since nuns are definitely not "in the market," there is no reason in the world why they should seek to attract others. Yet even you, perhaps, have remarked to yourself how becoming and dignified are the voluminous folds of a nun's skirt and the quaint design of her headdress.

But it is not their dress alone which sets nuns apart and marks them off as "different". Regardless of what you don't know about nuns, there is one fact of which you can be certain: that they are not married. Perhaps to you a chaste unmarried life — a celibate life — seems a very great sacrifice. Yes, it is a sacrifice — the nun gives up the human for the sake of the divine. If you could do that, wouldn't you feel privileged? That is how nuns feel about their life. You need only look into the eyes of a nun to see there the joy that she alone knows who has given her love to God.

But don't say that a chaste single life is impossible for women, or you will be condemning countless numbers who have given up the thought of marriage for praiseworthy motives, and they haven't become nuns.

Life of Service

Perhaps when you were hospitalized, you saw a nun caring for her patients, hour after hour. Did she pay you a short visit and then dash out to attend a card party? On the contrary, you were her sole care; your recovery, her only concern. Has it occurred to you that this devotion to her work was possible only because the nun was free from domestic cares?

This celibate life of self-denial is one which a nun freely chooses. You are just wasting your time, then, by feeling sorry for nuns, for they are the most satisfied women in the world. I recall, however, a

story which reflects all too clearly the misconception entertained by many on this point. Somewhere in the deep South two nuns sat in a railroad station. For a long time two colored ladies eyed them; finally, one could restrain her curiosity no longer. "What's dem?" whispered one to her companion. "Dey's nuns," came the stage whisper in reply. "What's nuns?" persisted the other. Came the answer: "Nuns is ladies dat live in a house all by deyselves and — dey ain't no men aroun'." "We-el," drawled the other, "dey sure goes into deep mournin' about it."

If nuns often arouse interest and curiosity, they are just as often the target for suspicion and animosity. Seeing nuns only on the street or in public conveyances, many persons not only wonder about a life so obviously different from their own, but they may also

continue to believe reports too evidently the offspring of prejudice. Such stories are the stock-in-trade of persons who lack either the opportunity or the desire of learning the truth about nuns.

On one occasion, for example, when traveling, I was respectfully approached by a non-Catholic gentleman who sincerely wished to learn the truth about nuns — he had been brought up on the usual fables. Is it true, he asked me, that a tunnel connects the priest's house and the convent? I told him the truth, that there is no tunnel or any other connection between a convent and the priest's house. Neither is it true, as he had been informed, that when two nuns walk down the street, one is a man in disguise. We have no masqueraders in the convent! Every nun you see is a real nun.

False Rumors

The strange idea of nuns entertained by many persons arises from the fact that they do not know any individual nun, have never gone to the trouble of meeting one and getting firsthand information about her life. The only information some have is misinformation, an unsavory concoction of half-truths well-seasoned with ignorance or malice.

Most nuns, I am sure, have heard some of the far-fetched stories about us which enjoy rather wide circulation. Every nun I know would welcome the opportunity to explain just what she is and why she is living a life apart from the world. In this booklet, I will tell you the truth about a nun's life and, in the telling, I will most probably answer most of your questions.

OUR COMMON PURPOSE — to strive for holiness

When all is said and done, the 147,000 nuns in the United States are pretty much alike. There are, it is true, many Orders of women in the Catholic Church, all differing from one another in spirit, garb and work. At different periods of history, the needs of the Church have been varied. All of these needs in turn have been served by holy men and women of faith and vision, who have established their organizations, we call them "Orders", to perform a definite work. Despite the differences, however, we nuns are fundament-

ally alike, in that our lives have one common purpose — that of striving for holiness through the observance of Christian poverty, chastity, and obedience.

Not only are different Orders of women very much the same, the members of an Order, although highly individualized, are bound together and, in a sense, made one by their common striving to attain their common goal — the perfect imitation of Christ. Yet among the members of an Order, too, we may note dissimilarities of background, temperament, disposition. And it is through God's help that these very real differences are overshadowed and controlled by the larger simple dominant purpose which governs every activity of every nun — the attainment of holiness.

A member of an Order, I have been associated closely for many years with splendid religious women in my own Order and in other Orders also. Some of these nuns are called contemplatives or cloistered nuns. By separation from the distraction of worldly concerns and pursuits, by the worship of God and prayer for others who are forgetful of prayer for themselves, cloistered nuns seek their goal of self-sanctification. Other nuns — and I am one of them — not only strive for perfect imitation of Christ through the observance of His counsels but also work among people for the salvation of others through the practice of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. But all nuns, let me repeat, share the same motives, love for Christ; and the same goal — union with Christ.

Already I have told you that I am a nun who knows nuns well. It is in the belief that you are interested in learning more about our life that I set about writing a sketch which is, in part, autobiographical, but which is, I believe, typical of all nuns.

How does it all start, you may wonder, this business of becoming a nun? While it is true that some girls, when still quite young, are strongly attracted to religious life, nevertheless I have reason to think that most girls become nuns in much the same way as I did. At the outset, I must admit that I was not the Saint-from-the-cradle type. In a perfectly ordinary childhood, faults such as vanity, sallies of temper and disobedience showed themselves, but they were met, thank God, by wise guidance and the firm — and oh, how firm! — hand of correction.

As a teen-ager, I attended Mass as regularly as I could, but no one ever spoke of me as an especially pious girl. It was the urgent need of help in the business of being good, that brought me weekly to Holy Communion. High school years were a busy round of study and fun; I always managed, though, to squeeze in those little prayers for God's guidance, however busy I was having a good time. I was normal. Plenty of dates and one or two more or less violent attacks of puppy love marked my teens. I liked a gay time but I had serious thoughts, on occasion. These were the years that brought the first desires of becoming a nun.

An Inner Voice

At first, the idea of a nurse's life strongly appealed to me. That self-sacrificing life would be something worth while and I did so want to do something fine for Christ. Then, after Holy Communion, the other thought started coming, "Why not be a nun — both a nun and a nurse?" Then the same idea began to recur at the oddest times; it would keep running through my mind at a dance in perfect time with my feet. Repeatedly I brushed off the thought with something of finality, "I'm just not good enough to be a nun."

Living for Christ

And so, for a long time, I hid in my heart the desire of living my life for Christ. This attraction was due to a cause more than human. What girl would want to leave a happy home? Neither did I relish particularly the prospect of a life dressed in black and white! Gay clothes delighted me. Yet I knew that I wanted to make my life count, I wanted to do something to please Christ and to help others. So I prayed for light to know if I had a religious vocation. Since becoming a nun, I have learned that desires such as these grow up slowly with many girls; with me, they developed during less than a year. God calls each in His own time, and in His own way!

At last came the day when I determined to talk over with my family this attraction I felt for the life of a nun. It had been hard enough to make up my mind to broach the subject; I was far from ready for the incredulous smiles and jokes that greeted my news. I was far too young, the family agreed. My seventeen years that made me eligible for other responsibilities suddenly meant nothing! It was fine if I had a vocation but I must test it, I must be very sure, they urged. Besides — and this was very true — I was alto-

gether too noisy and gay; I'd have to stop talking so much; in fact, I didn't have a disposition that was made for the convent.

When my family saw that I was in earnest, they were all very proud of me. Hadn't my mother prayed for years that God would grant a religious vocation to one of her children? But all said that I'd better wait till I was older, that I'd be too lonesome, and that I'd have a hard time learning to be more quiet. How well did my family know me! One of my sisters, who had a well-developed aversion for all nuns, assured me that she'd have nothing to do with me if I should become a nun.

Thinking It Out

Rather confused by all this, I turned to the priest who was my confessor for advice and encouragement. After listening to my brief statements, he only said, "Pray, child, and try to learn more about the life of a nun. I'll remember you in my Mass,." The pamphlet rack in church supplied me with a copy of a booklet entitled "Follow Him" by Godfrey Poage, C.P. (Thomas More Book Shop, 22 Monroe St., Chicago 13, Illinois, 15c). Here I found clearly stated the qualifications for becoming a nun. Age limit? Well, I was at least past 15 and not yet 30, so I was all right on that score, I figured. As for physical and mental equipment, I knew that I was healthy in mind and body; neither was there any insanity in my family. But my spiritual qualifications? Had I any? Of one thing I was certain — I wanted to please God, to save my own soul, and to work for the salvation of others. That was surely a right intention, wasn't it? The requirement listed as most important — acceptance by the Superior of a religious Order — well, that would remain to be seen.

I learned that no book, easily available, describes all the religious Orders of women in the United States. It was necessary to apply to the authorities of the religious Orders of women which I found listed in the back of the pamphlet "Follow Him." I wrote to some that appealed to me. From the literature sent in answer to my request, I found out a lot about different Orders. Some of my former teachers, who are nuns, set me straight on a few points, but at no time did they even suggest that I join their Order. Very definitely, I was *not* "roped in."

I must mention one nun who taught me in high school. I didn't like her particularly as a woman, but as a teacher, she was "tops". She had a course that was called "Christian Origins", dealing with proofs of the divinity of Christ and of the divine institution of the Church. I'll never forget the first class and I hope that I won't ever forget the substance of the whole course. "You girls," she began, "are probably Catholics because you were born into Catholic families. You have done what your parents told you was the thing to do. That is fine. No one would quarrel with you for doing that. But now you are coming to the age when you

are supposed to know the score. You are supposed to act intelligently and have good reasons for living your own lives. Well, there is a whole lot to learn in living your own lives, but this course is intended to give you the reasons why you should live your lives as Catholics." Her course did me more *permanent* good than any other — and my English teacher was outstanding.

For several months I prayed and read and thought — and waited. As the months went by and I still wanted to be a nun, I decided to try to enter. All of the pamphlets I had read suggested the advisability of consulting a priest. This I resolved to do.

One fall afternoon I presented myself by appointment before the priest to whom I went to confession regularly. I chose him because I felt he knew me better than any other did and I believed he would be in a position to give me the advice that I needed. As clearly as possible I outlined my reasons for wanting to be a nun. He nodded approval when I told him that I felt the life of a nun, modeled on Christ's life, must be very pleasing to God. In reply to his questions, I told him that not only after Holy Communion, but even while on dates, I had been drawn to religious life, in order to please Christ and to save souls. His answers showed me that I could count on God's help in the matter of leaving home, foregoing marriage, and, especially, giving up my own sweet will.

Must Be Sure

Then he proceeded to answer my objections, real or imagined. He told me that I could not be sure that I had a religious vocation until I had tried the life and had been accepted by a religious superior. In reply to my objection that, although a weekly communicant, I could not, by any stretch of the imagination, be called holy, he reminded me that I did not have to be a saint in order to enter a convent, that, at this stage, God was satisfied with my desire to be good. I should get out of my head any idea that only those girls become nuns who are a "spiritual elite". Our Lord offered not a special but a general invitation to otherwise ordinary people when He said: "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily, and follow me." (Luke IX:23). He agreed that, on entering a convent, I'd probably be lonesome at first, but he pointed out that I'd be not less so if I were to marry and leave home. And as for the objection that I liked gay clothes, parties, boys, that was simply no objection at all. The gayest often make the

best nuns. After all, who likes a "drip"? Men and pretty clothes — certainly both represented something of a sacrifice, but neither is absolutely essential to one's happiness.

Proceeded Slowly

I was, he conceded, not very old; in fact, I was still in my teens. Still, if I was old enough to select my own clothes, choose my own friends, I must have at least a fair share of common sense and good judgment. And as far as sacrificing marriage is concerned, for nuns it is a giving up, not a getting left, as many mistakenly believe. There is no reason why Christ should attract only old maids — actual or potential!

It was quite comforting to hear him explain that even the Saints had periods of the religious "dumps" during which they found prayer extremely difficult, so that I need not be in the least surprised if I should find myself growing weary at prayer.

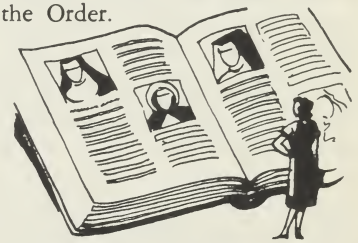
When I proposed the weak-kneed objection that perhaps I should stay home and repay my parents for their care of me, I was told that if they are not in dire need, the girl who leads a consecrated life as a nun does far more for her family by her prayers and sacrifices than she could ever do by remaining at home. To whom do the parents turn for consolation when the boys go off to war? To the daughter who is a nun. Who listens to the mother's worries and shows her how to bear her trials with resignation? The daughter who became a nun. In short, the girl who becomes a nun is the one who keeps the family name. On every count, the girl whom the parents give up to God, is the daughter they really keep closer than others.

So, after weighing well all my reasons for wanting to be a nun, and honestly evaluating all my objections, the priest told me I gave signs of a religious vocation. Should I accept it? "Before making any decision," he counseled, "look into several different Orders." The decision as to what Order I should enter must be entirely mine. So I secured vocation literature from several communities to which I felt specially attracted, and set about studying the history, the aims, and the work of these Orders.

BUT WHY DO THEY WEAR such "funny" clothes?

As a classic example of unity amid variety, I give you the crowds of nuns that throng the campus of the Catholic University of America in Washington, D. C. There they are, young and not so young, slender and stout, but all wearing what many non-Catholics and even some Catholics term "funny dresses." Black, brown, grey and white are Mother Church's favorite colors; as for styles, well, they are literally "out of this world". And one of these Orders I was planning to join! I smiled to myself, I confess, as I studied the pictures of the habits worn by the Orders that most interested me.

Systematically I started reading the vocation literature. As I read, I learned the reasons for the many different Orders. This one, for instance, cared for the aged; the pictures of the nuns performing services for these elderly persons tugged at my heart. Yet another Order was engaged exclusively in teaching; I tried to picture myself in a classroom—and failed. Or should I become a nursing nun and care for the sick in a hospital? Quite naturally I found myself more drawn to some Orders than to others. The habit (that is how we refer to our dress) may have influenced me, but I was far more concerned with the work done by the Order.



Reading the history of different Orders was indeed a revelation. Some had a glorious record reaching back many centuries; others, on the contrary, being relatively young, had only a short history quickly read. Perhaps you have wondered, as did I, just why there are so many different Orders in the Church. It is, I learned, because women of different dispositions desire to work for God in a religious Order. The large number of Orders not only permits a larger number of women to find a religious group which satisfies their needs and dispositions, but, at the same time, makes possible a wider range of services performed for the welfare of mankind.

The story of the development of convent life for women made interesting reading. It was in the first ages of the Church, I discovered, that Christian virgins first professed a life distinguished from

ordinary life. With the intention of imitating Christ, they observed continence; many of them gave up riches. An interesting fact, I found, is that they lived, at first, not in convents but in their own homes. But clearly their life was far less complex than ours. These virgins did not have to rise at five in order to be ready to serve hospital patients their breakfast before the doctors should come on the hall; nor be ready at eight o'clock, after several hours of prayer, to teach several hundred students in a crowded high school.

Third Century

Women began living a religious life together in the third century after Christ, when St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, established convents for religious women. I could readily understand that such a life would necessitate obedience to a superior. But the persecutions in the third century closed the monasteries and convents and forced the nuns to retire to the safety of the desert. It was during this period, I learned, that St. Pachomius built a convent where religious women lived with his sister.

The founding of religious Orders as such brings into focus the greatest names in early Christian times — Benedict, Augustine, Basil. For their own religious Orders of men, each wrote a rule of monastic life, which was later adapted for women. These three rules form the bases for most of the rules written at a later date.

During the eighth and ninth centuries, nuns lived together in a community, their dwellings were called convents, and they wore a modest black dress. During the years that followed, many different communities for women were established, all having a common goal, self-sanctification, and some special work of Christian charity as well.

Different Orders

Nuns today, I learned, are of two types. The contemplative or cloistered Orders live a secluded life of prayer, with little or no contact with the outside world; the active Orders live a mixed life of prayer and work for the neighbor. Again, some Orders confine their activities to one field exclusively; others engage in several works. All Orders, however, are distinguished by the obligation to strive for holiness; all wear a certain garb and follow some form of permanent community life.

I had often seen scores of nuns in the railroad station shortly after

the middle of August. Now I learned that nuns generally get their annual assignments around that time, and leave, under orders from their General Superior for an assignment where they work under the local superior.

The more I read about different Orders, the more clearly I realized that most of them are merely the prolonged shadow of some great saint or of some other outstanding Christian man or woman. It is but natural for the Order to reflect the spirit of its founder. This spirit is an intangible thing but always recognizable. While it is true that all Orders have in common certain means of striving for holiness, yet it is no less true that each order has some particular means that it uses, to which it subordinates all other means. It is thus that an Order develops its characteristic spirit.

Moreover, it seemed quite logical, as I read, for the members of an Order engaged in carrying on the work initiated by the founder to wear a distinguishing garb given to it by that founder. After all, the wearing of a distinguishing uniform is not, I reflected, such an uncommon thing. The Red Cross uniform needs no introduction; all understand the principles for which it stands. The uniform of "Salvation Nell" is a familiar sight on the streets, especially at Christmas time. And are not all the armed services of the United States distinguished by their uniforms? Yet persons who have never seen these uniforms would regard them, most probably, with curious interest. To a like cause may be ascribed the comments voiced by many on the subject of nuns' dresses.

But why are these dresses so foreign in appearance? That was one of my questions, too, until I read that the garb of many Orders is the style of dress prevailing in a given foreign country at the time of the founding of the Order.

While it is true that many of the more recently established Orders wear dresses modeled after those of the older Orders, still some of the newer Orders wear dresses quite modern in style. These neat tailored jobs were adopted, I read, in order to facilitate the work of the respective Orders.

I had not only studied the work done by several different groups but I had given some consideration to the habits worn. Now I made my choice!

The next step was to apply for admission. Just in case you're wondering, it is not too easy to enter a convent; again, let me repeat, no girl is ever coaxed in

against her will. In compliance with the law of the Church, which carefully supervises such things, the Order made a thorough investigation before accepting my application. My pastor wrote a letter recommending me to the Mother Superior. After my family, no one knew me better. The Superiors satisfied themselves that I was neither too young nor too old; in other words, that I fell within the required age bracket of sixteen to thirty. A doctor's certificate testified that I was free from physical and mental illness. It was ascertained, too, that my family was free from insanity and was otherwise acceptable. My parents were not dependent on me for support; neither did I have any debts for which the Order could be held liable. Finally, the Order made sure that I was guilty of no crime for which I could be punished or which might embarrass the Order. My application was accepted and the date set for my entrance into the Motherhouse of the Order of my choice.

COME, SEE WHAT LIFE is like in a Convent!

At last I was a postulant! I had asked the Order to admit me; therefore it was wisely giving me six months in which to prove that I was in earnest and that I would be an asset, not a liability.

The very threshold of religious life, the postulancy, is a period of adjustment, of trial, demanded before a girl starts her novitate. It is a transition stage, designed to give a girl a taste of religious life, to see if she has the stability and the health to live the life of a given religious Order. A girl may believe she has a vocation; the postulancy, passed under the experienced guidance of a directress, is the time to find out for sure.

For six months, eleven other postulants and I prayed and worked, studied and played together. Our duties, certain jobs we were given to do and which we called our "charges", were dispatched with cheerfulness and exactitude, for were we not sweeping and dusting to please Jesus and in union with Him? How surprised our families would have been could they have seen the alacrity with which we tucked up our ankle-length skirts and pinned back our black capes and short black veils, preparatory to washing stacks of dishes! The *motive* had made the difference in our attitude, for the dishes were still dishes.

Our directress explained many things to us; for example, just what the older nuns were doing when they sat so quietly in the chapel before Mass. That time, she said, is the most important in a nun's day, because in meditation a nun learns to know and love Christ,

and if she loves Him, she strives to please Him always and so becomes holy. It was also a concern of our directress to see that we enjoyed many hours of recreation, which included strenuous basketball, volleyball, and softball games, as well as singing and pleasant conversation with charming novices, fifty of them.

Day by day, as our little band of postulants came to understand more about religious life, we looked forward with growing eagerness to that longed-for day when we would receive our new names and the habit of the Order. The new name which I would receive would be that of some saint in the long history of the Church, whom I would make my special heavenly patron.

I smile at the recollection of what one of my friends had meant for consolation on the eve of my entrance, "Oh, well, if you aren't happy, you can always leave." And here I was, daily offering my most fervent prayers that I would be allowed to stay! I had so little to offer, it seemed to me. This misgiving I confided to my directress; she smiled and said, "Just give your all — your heart to love Christ, your will to obey. That is all He asks — but that is everything."

Finally came the day when each of us asked the authorities to admit us to the novitate and we received a favorable reply. Next came an official interview with the Bishop's delegate; the Church wants only a willing service from her nuns. All of us having satisfied the examiner that we were in the convent by our own free choice and that this choice had been arrived at after serious consideration, we began an eight-day retreat — eight days of silence and prayer — in immediate preparation for what we called our "Clothing Day". The spiritual exercises of retreat served to deepen our appreciation of the divine Call, and inspired us with a generous determination to give ourselves entirely to God and to His work.

Joyful Days

The days passed quickly but not quickly enough. We found endless excuses to visit the room in which our dresses were laid out in readiness for the great day. There they were, side by side, the bridal gown and the somber black habit. True daughters of Eve, we delightedly smoothed the white satin folds of our gowns, but confided to one another our relief that we did not have to wear them very long. After six months, clothes had lost much of their glamour; our black and white looked just right.

At last the great day dawned! We found ourselves dressed as brides in shimmering white satin, a symbol of our nuptials with

Christ. Preceded by the whole community of nuns holding lighted tapers and singing the traditional hymn of the Church, O Gloriosa Virginum, we walked up the aisle in our lovely convent chapel, our hearts fairly bursting with happiness. In reply to the Bishop's question, each declared it was of her own free will that she chose religious life as practiced in this Order. There was a solemn hush as the large congregation of parents and friends listened to questions and answers. Then we received at the altar a lighted candle, symbol of Christ, the Light of the world, after which we filed from the chapel to be dressed in our newly-blessed religious garb.

No Shaved Heads

Before our headdress and white veil were adjusted, some of our hair was clipped. In the past, when girls all wore long hair, this bobbing at the commencement of religious life was a sacrifice of something dear, something which was a considerable source of vanity. In these days of short hair, however, the clipping is more or less symbolical. Incidentally, contrary to the belief of the ill-informed, nuns do not shave their heads.

And now, wearing the white veil of novices and the habit of the Order, we re-entered the chapel to assist at Holy Mass. Again and again we whispered our consecration to Christ and begged God's helping grace to live our religious life generously. Who but a nun can understand the joy that floods the soul of a novice as she commences in so solemn a manner her period of training called "the novitiate"?

During the breakfast which follows, there is much to be said. Remember, the eight days of silence with which we prepared for this day is a long stretch and we are normal girls who have, thank God, a keen sense of humor. We tell our new name to our friends and try to remember the new names of our companions. Perhaps one of the senior nuns gives us a little lecture about the saint whose name we now bear before we hurry away to spend a day with our relatives. They are curious and examine every part of our habit to see how it is put together. Of course, they are very proud of us and tell us so between smiles and tears. There are gifts for us, too, a new silver watch, a copy of the "Imitation of Christ" and of the New Testament, and the old stand-bys, candy and stationery. Nothing is wanting to make this, our Clothing Day, a treasured memory.

Training Begins

Now commences our novitiate. We, my companions and I, spend the next two years learning the history and spirit of the Order, the principles and practice of religious life. Studies, too, fill many hours. We were trying our religious life, and were being tried out. I recall the day when I was told to walk slowly up and down the stairs several times because I had raced down without a trace of religious decorum. And there was the time when I learned an im-

portant lesson — that of detachment — when I was directed to give another novice the fountain pen I had just received as a gift.

Community Life

Periods of prayer, instructions on the religious life, retreats, conferences and spiritual reading were all a definite part of our character formation. To these were added advice from the novice mistress and from the confessor. Equally important in our religious training were the daily periods of recreation, which challenged our ability to get along with others.

You may wonder what we did all day, as novices. Well, let me assure you that the day of a novice is far from dull, and is certainly not empty. Anyone who thinks of nuns as idle women cooped up in a convent, needs to think again.

I, as well as every nun, can still recall a typical day, regardless of the years that lie between. There was the rising bell cheerfully sounding the beginning of a new day for the Lord — at five in the morning. It is only God's grace that conquers the natural desire to catch just a few more minutes of sleep. After all, who really enjoys getting up at five, or getting up at all, for that matter? But out I hop with my swift morning offering to God, and twenty minutes later finds me washed and dressed and in my place for morning prayers. The half hour's conversation with God called meditation was slowed up a bit once or twice by involuntary nodding. At Mass, I offer Christ to God as my Gift and then receive Him back in Holy Communion. Although I love chanting the Psalms of the Office, the official prayer of the Church, I occasionally am distracted wondering whether breakfast will feature orange juice — or prunes. Remember, I am still just a novice — a beginner.

After breakfast, with a visit to our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament as the perfect "Thank you", I go briskly about the business of bed-making and dusting the floor. Then off to my stint of dusting in the chapel. This is my "charge". How happy I am to keep house for Christ!

But novices must study. For three hours, therefore, I attend classes where I struggle with Latin and English, history, and the like. Examination of conscience, prayers and dinner fill the next hour. Then I again visit the chapel where I join in chanting Vespers and Compline, another section of the Office, and short vocal prayers.

The hour of recreation which follows gives me needed relaxation and a chance to let off steam with my companions.

During the next two hours of

study I prepare assignments. Little did I dream, the year before in high school, that my novitate days would find me still struggling with term papers. But all things have an end and I really enjoy the following half hour of choir practice. Why, those novices are far better than our glee club in high school!

A conference with the novice mistress and the chanting of Matins and Lauds, as the evening Office is called, precede supper. That important exercise over, I again visit the chapel, this time to prepare the vestments for morning Mass, after which I spend a precious half hour in private prayer.

On the stroke of seven fifteen the bell calls me to recreation. All of us assemble at Our Lady's shrine for a hymn and a short prayer before engaging in an exciting ball game, complete with a cheering section and entirely too many umps. Another bell and a sudden hush silences even excited novices delightedly chanting the score. Off we troop to the chapel to kneel at the feet of Christ and cast a backward glance over the day, to check spiritual losses and gains. Tired but oh, so happy, I waste no time getting ready for bed. Freed from the slavery of creaming my face and rolling up my hair, I tuck a tired novice into bed at nine-thirty. That's a day in the convent.

"IF THOU WILT BE PERFECT . . . come follow me"

When speaking to some persons about religious life, I have found that they have not too clear an idea of what it is all about. Sometimes all they know is that "it takes two years to make a nun." Even this scrap of information is not entirely correct, for preceding the two years' novitate, there is the postulancy or probation period of six months. After the nun takes temporary vows at the end of her two years' novitate, there is a three year interval before she pronounces final vows and consecrates herself forever as God's own.

You may be interested to know how this religious life develops. One of the first lessons I learned — and it had to be repeated many times! — is to look at things from Christ's point of view. By this, I mean recognizing in daily disappointments and difficulties, in a word, in the trials of life, just so many opportunities of carrying the cross of Christ, of proving real love for Him.

I was taught to pray, not just to say prayers, to raise heart and mind to God in meditation, to pray all day at my work by recollecting from time to time the presence of God, to pray by stamping every thought, word and action with a good intention and offering it to Him.

Upon entering the convent, I had

a vague idea of what religious life meant. To me, it was the imitation of Christ, to which all Christians are called. "You therefore are to be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matt. V:48). I soon learned, however, that for the nun, this imitation is not merely a general desire and effort to be like Christ, but rather, a vital, specific striving to be like Christ, through the observance of the promises made to God in the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

If the essential condition for all Christians is the avoidance of mortal sin and the keeping of the Commandments, in the case of the religious, there is added the keeping of the vows, together with the rules and constitutions, the customs and duties of her Order. The life of self-denial led by religious was begun by Christ Who perfectly practiced poverty, chastity and obedience, and recommended their observance to us.

Once when I was visiting with my family, a Protestant friend made the remark, "Christ never told women to be nuns and to live in convents." I had the presence of mind to point out that from my reading of the Gospels, I gathered that He was not particularly concerned with *where* people lived, but rather *how* they lived. The New Testament approves of a woman renouncing marriage in order to serve God exclusively (Matt. XIX:12; 1 Cor. VII), and even leaving "home, brothers and sisters, father and mother" to do so (Matt. V:20). In fact, Christ promises them a blessing for doing so.

The religious state is a permanent manner of life legally established in and under the protection of the Church. It is a discipline, a constant struggle against self, in accordance with the dictates of reason, conscience, and faith. At this stage of my life, I often wondered apropos of self-denial, if rising in the morning at five ever would become less difficult. I don't wonder any more; I know. It doesn't.

It was pointed out to me that greed, lust and pride are three of the greatest forces dragging human beings from God, and that if I wished to get close to God, I must learn to detach myself from material goods, affection for them and the pleasures they bring, and self-will.

Through daily instructions and reading, I came to understand that the vow of poverty is the voluntary renunciation of the right to use independently anything of material value. We must get permission from our religious Superiors to spend any amount of money, even small amounts that may be given to us personally. I didn't

find this easy. But Christ's example was there to encourage me. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that being rich, he became poor for your sakes; that through his poverty you might be rich" (2 Cor. VIII:9).

I now understood why one of my teachers used to say "our books", not "my books"; she considered nothing her own. And this was the offering that I had chosen to make, the offering which is valid only if it is freely made. In the course of my instructions, I learned

that any threat, pressure, dread or violence would render the vows null and void. And it is not alone the observance of the vow of poverty but the acquiring of the spirit of poverty which is the aim of all nuns; was it not to the poor in spirit that Christ promised the kingdom of Heaven?

I learned, consequently, to get along with little, to want less. Only in this way, I found, can a nun be free to center her whole attention on seeking spiritual riches. Is this giving up of material things necessary, you may ask? It is the condition laid down by Christ for those who wish to attain more than ordinary holiness. "If thou wilt be perfect, go, sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and come follow me" (Matt. XIX:21).

By chastity, the second vow that nuns make, I would give up my right to marriage. This renunciation of a natural right does not mean, however, that I did not feel the very normal desire of a woman to mother a family . . . much less that I felt any disdain for marriage or family life. What it does mean is this: that I was, by God's grace, generous enough to sacrifice the joys of motherhood, for the love of Christ and so free myself from family concerns in order to work for the spiritual and temporal welfare of the neighbor. The vow frees the nun from earthly love so that she may more easily set her whole heart on God". . . and the unmarried woman and the virgin thinketh on the things of the Lord that she may be holy both in body and in spirit" (1 Cor. VII:34).

Obedience, the third vow, is the one that would make me a real nun, I was told. By sacrificing the most personal part of me, my free will, I would be offering my whole self, an offering the most pleasing of all to God. I would vow to obey, according to the rules and constitution of my Order, the commands of my superiors. For me, since authority flows from the head of the Church to the superiors of the Order, the directions of my superiors will represent the Will of God. Well, that would certainly

be a consolation at all times, I thought, to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that I was doing the Will of God. So when, as a novice, I was sent one day to scrub a floor that didn't look the least bit dirty, I scrubbed with a vengeance. That was what God wanted of me at the moment. Had He not given me an example? "He humbled himself becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross" (I Philip II:8).

So, by degrees, all that makes religious life one of joyous self-denial was clearly explained to me. But youth is courageous, is idealistic, and I was not afraid of the challenge presented by a life of labor, prayer, self-denial, for I had also tasted some of its joys. Daily I studied the rules and constitution and heard them explained. I was shown how to overcome my faults, to root out, one by one, the unlovely traits of character, the faults that would prevent me from showing forth in my life the likeness of Christ. All of this, I was told, would be a life-long task and that I should not be discouraged at my slow progress.

The example of my novitiate companions was a tremendous help to me. Of a naturally lively and cheerful disposition, I saw with relief that their cheerfulness and gaiety were no hindrance, but rather a positive help in their earnest spiritual striving.

I came to see that true happiness for a nun lies in giving all to God with no holding back or counting the cost. During these years, God was lavishly generous to me, making pleasant by His presence such humdrum tasks as peeling potatoes, dusting the stairs, and washing the mops. There were little hard things to bear, also. Such was the trial of being misunderstood by others, which I was taught to bear with spiritual profit.

As you read, you may wonder if all of my novice companions made their vows with me. No, they did not. During the two years of novitate, I saw several girls leave. Two of them were not able to take correction and criticism without showing moodiness and resentment. Ability to stand up to this and, what is more important, to profit by it, is a "must" in religious

life, I soon discovered. One novice became ill with no hope of recovery, and so could not be allowed to take her vows. Religious life is not for "weak sisters"; a girl must have ordinary good health to be able to carry on the work of the Order. Then there was the elderly novice who admired the life, but had been her own boss so long that she simply could not learn to

obey. To permit such a person to take a vow of obedience would, of course, be simply out of the question. Finally, there were two novices who were advised to leave, since, in the judgment of the superiors, they had no vocation to the Order. Thus was the truth brought home to me that the prime purpose of the novitiate is to provide sincere candidates a period of trial and testing. No Order wants members who are not "sold" on religious life as practiced in that particular Order. It is good to know that the door swings both ways; it is far easier to get out than in.

Almost before I knew it, the two years had sped by and it was again time for an interview with the Bishop's delegate. I sounded well the depths of my soul; yes, I was sure that I wanted to stay, that I wanted to pronounce my vows. Again there was an eight day retreat during which I made a general confession of all the sins of my past life. I wanted to be spotless as I made a complete offering of myself to Christ. Again the chapel was filled with relatives and friends, for it was what we called "Profession Day". I made my temporary vows, binding for three years, and my white veil of a beginner in religious life was exchanged for the black veil I was to wear till death. I say, till death, for even on that day when I pronounced the vows which were temporary, I knew in my heart that, with God's help, I had made them forever. Of the favors with which God showered me on that great day, I cannot tell; only those who have given themselves entirely to God know, as I know, the joys that He gives on Vow Day.

And that joy deepened every day of the three years that followed. So, for the last time, I told the Bishop's delegate who examined us before final vows, that I was perfectly satisfied, that I was sure I wished to spend my life as a member of the Order I had chosen. Only on this condition does the Church allow her children to make perpetual vows. Herein does she show her wisdom, I thought, in leaving a nun perfectly free to remain or to leave at the expiration

of her temporary vows. So I made my final vows in the presence of my relatives and friends, and I received the silver ring — which would serve as a continual reminder to me and a symbol to others that I had consecrated myself to God and His work.

I HAVE NEVER REGRETTED becoming a nun

After many happy years of religious life, I know that this life is my vocation and career — that I chose right. But that word "vocation" needs a word of explanation, maybe. To the ordinary person, vocation means a call to any state of life — marriage, single life in the world, the religious life. To me, a nun, and to all nuns, the word means a divine call, an inspiration or a series of inspirations by which God draws a person to consecrate herself, through love, to a life of close union with Him, by the observance of the vows.

How did I know that God wanted me? That's a question I have often been asked. I well remember how fond I was of gay parties, of good times, in general. It was the grace of vocation that robbed these things of their attraction. While still in grade school, I wanted to do something extra for Christ; I wanted to make up to Him for those who offended Him. High school years brought a deepening of this desire. Frequently during prayer and reception of the Sacraments, I felt drawn to religious life, but just as frequently, at unusual times — at a dance or a movie. A natural repugnance to all that was associated with leaving home made me shudder. Christ knocked at the door of my heart; I peeked out through a crack, then quickly closed the door. The pleasures of youth strongly attracted me; a goodly share of vanity made me wince at the mere thought of wearing black and white forever. But the knocking persisted. God's all-powerful grace it was that gave me the courage to open my heart, to welcome the invitation of Christ to live for Him. I determined to lean hard on Christ for the strength that never fails and to try out my vocation. So I entered my novitiate.

As time went on, I learned how very little the world, for all its promises, can really give. Just the fact that nothing on earth is lasting served, perhaps more than anything else, to detach my heart from the pleasures that had so delighted me. The calm, even life in the convent was satisfying and well calculated to show me the joy of living close to God. At that time, I treasured above all, as I still do, the privilege of living under the same roof with our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament.

Did I miss my family and my friends? Of course I did, because I was very human. And didn't our Lord, also, miss His family and friends when He started His public life? But if there is one place better calculated than any other to chase away the "blues", it is a religious novitiate. I was thrown into close association with many girls, hand-picked, if you will, all fired with the desire to live and work for Christ and souls. Full of eagerness and enthusiasm, we found

nothing too hard; we had not a worry in the world, as our light-hearted gaiety testified. We were all, or nearly all, the proverbial good novice who eats well, sleeps well, and prays well.

Of this happy group, a very few left. They either felt they were in the wrong place, were too lonesome, or became ill with no hope of recovery. Another minority group was advised to leave. The reason was not hard to find. One wept to excess, for instance, at every visit from her family. No Order will keep a subject who does not serve the Lord gladly. Another attached herself exclusively to a couple of her friends and would have nothing to do with

the rest of the novices. If there is one line of conduct more productive of trouble than this, I am sure I cannot name it.

Just what do we nuns think of a girl who enters and then leaves? Very definitely we feel that she has done the right thing in leaving. Absolutely no stigma attaches to a girl who leaves an Order for which she mistakenly thought she had a vocation. The only way to find out is to enter; the purpose of the novitiate is to afford a girl an opportunity to find out if she is really called by God to a religious life, or if she just thinks she is.

It takes some time for a girl to become adjusted to convent life. I found it difficult to pray when the bell indicated it was the time to pray. This was especially true in the morning, early! And others did, too, if drooping heads mean anything. But I was reminded that the Lord regards only deliberate faults, not those against which we struggle. It was a comfort to be told that I would get used to thinking before breakfast.

"Do you all get along together?" people sometimes ask nuns. We do and this is the "how" of it. We may not be and often are not equally attracted, naturally speaking, to all the nuns with whom we live; yet, because Christ has honored them with His call, we learn, for His sake, to be cordial to all. In any difficulties we may experience, we turn for help to Christ, Who never fails us. The lesson we start learning in the novitiate we continue to learn throughout our lives; that nothing and nobody can keep me from loving Christ and doing His will.

I stayed because I wanted to stay. At any time during my novitiate or at the expiration of my temporary vows, I was free to leave. Indeed, had the superiors felt I had no vocation to their Order, they would have been obliged to

advise me to leave. It is quite possible you see, for a girl to enter an Order under the impression that she will be able to follow the life, and then discover that she cannot. In fairness both to herself and to the Order, she should leave. Certainly in my case there was no coaxing nor compulsion on the part of the superiors. My confessor assured me I was in the right place; he, more than any other, was in a position to judge, for he not only knew the rules of the Order, but also my character and temperament.

The very fact of the superiors admitting me to reception of the habit, and later, to temporary vows and then final profession of vows, definitely put the seal of the Church on my vocation. This call from superiors is actually the deciding factor in determining a vocation to religious life. I wish to emphasize again that a nun who takes her vows does so of her own free will. The Daughters of Charity, for instance, never take final vows at all, but make vows for one year only. At the expiration of the vows each year, they are all perfectly free to leave... but very few do.

There has never been a doubt in my mind, however, that I am not in the right place. I am sure that I am, because only by God's grace could I even desire to live a life which is self-denial and discipline all the way. Again, it was God's grace that prompted my superiors to give me the call to vows.

But, you may ask, what of those who leave after taking vows for life? You may know someone classed as an "ex-nun." There need be no opprobrium attached to the term "ex-nun". Even after she has made vows for life, circumstances can arise that make it necessary for a nun to seek and to be granted by the proper authorities a dispensation from her vows, so that she can return to civilian life. Ill-health is the most common reason. Such an "ex-nun" may be honorably discharged.

But there are "ex-nuns" who have been dishonorably discharged. Usually they are nuns who left the convent without bothering to be dispensed from their vows. They simply went A.W.O.L. and are unfaithful to their vows. What about them? That brings me back to the definition of vocation — a series of inspirations and divine helps enabling one personally to consecrate her earthly life to God. A nun must not fail to pray daily for perseverance, to be disposed to cooperate with the daily helps that God offers her to live well her religious life. When a nun "deserts" after her final vows, she is to be pitied and, as far as possible, helped. The number of unfaithful nuns is,

thank God, very small, by comparison with the legion of happy, faithful nuns who serve God and His Church so well.

Of my novitiate companions, two left the Order after final vows. Neither found in the world the happiness for which she sacrificed her religious vocation. All of us who stayed did so, I repeat, of our own free will. We loved and still love the religious life of our Order. Through close association with Christ and with those who have consecrated themselves to Him, we have found a joy which we would not exchange for all that the world can offer. So don't feel sorry for nuns; you're wasting your pity on the happiest group of women in the world.

ALL RIGHT—WHAT "GOES ON" Behind Convent Walls?

As a curious grade-schooler, I joined a group walking up and down in front of the nuns' convent. We spoke about this or that nun, but came back over and over to the same old question, "What does a convent look like on the inside?" You, too, may be interested, so I'll give you a personally conducted tour.

A convent, you know, is a place where we religious women live and work under the direction of a Superior. Sometimes a convent is attached to the school, the hospital, or the orphange where we work. Work? Yes, that's the term applied to the task to which we are assigned annually by the Superior. We are in the service and, like soldiers, we take orders and like them. Teaching and caring for the sick, for orphans, and for the aged, for the wayward, and for the poor, are the major works carried on by the many active Orders in the Church.

Kitchens and laundries don't function by themselves. There is clerical work, too, connected with every institution staffed by nuns. Wise Superiors place us in the

work for which they deem us best suited. Just as you might expect, God helps a nun in any work that she carries on through obedience. Nuns, too, are well-qualified for the work entrusted. Occasionally, however, in an emergency, it does happen that a nun is assigned to task for which she is not trained. The work does not suffer, though, for the nun, conscious of her insufficient training, works doubly hard to offset her deficiency.

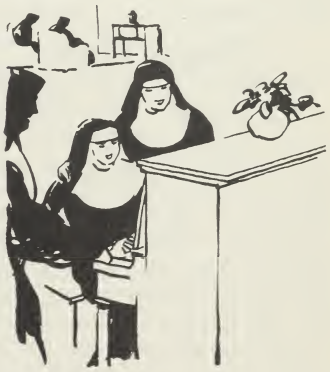
But to get back to these buildings called convents! Those connected with hospitals and orphanages are often large. As a rule, a motherhouse or a novitiate building is large. A motherhouse, by the way, is the principal house of an Order, where the Superiors reside and, frequently, the aged and infirm nuns, also.

Other convents are small, as is the case in small country towns where three or four teaching nuns live in an unpretentious building. But, large or small, all nuns love their convent home, of which Christ is the Head.

The Nuns at Home

So much for the outside. And the inside? The chapel is, of course, the most important and best-loved spot. Clean white altar linens, flowers, and lights are the offerings of hearts in love with Christ. Nuns spend from three to four hours daily in the chapel, for they know it is only by companionship with Christ that they can come to reflect His image.

In every convent the chapel is a magnet that irresistably draws our hearts. From my early morning visit to my last goodnight visit, I come often, during the intervening hours, to the feet of Christ. Daily I assist at Mass and meditate in the chapel. Community prayers bring me back at regular hours. Before and after meals, I have a short visit with Christ. Before and after school, before leaving the convent for a shopping trip or a visit to a dentist, I turn naturally toward the chapel. My daily rosary, way of the cross, and examination of conscience all find me before the Tabernacle. Finally, the day closes with night prayers in the chapel.



After the chapel, the focal point of a convent is the recreation room. As in every room, of course, there is a crucifix. Pictures, statues, tables and chairs are ordinary fixtures; a piano, record-player, radio, books, and magazines lend an air of informality to a room where the nuns daily gather, by rule, for periods of relaxation.

The dining room, called the refectory, is quite plain. A picture of

the Last Supper usually adorns a wall, while tables, chairs, and a serving table complete the furnishings. Usually there is a service room nearby for dishwashing activities, and a kitchen which differs from any other kitchen only that it boasts few gadgets and labor-saving devices.

In most Orders, every nun has her own sleeping room. Besides a crucifix, religious picture or statue, the room contains a bed, a chair, a closet, a chifforobe, a desk and lamp, sometimes a small bookcase, and a lavatory. Certainly there is nothing elaborate about the room where a nun rests for seven or eight hours.

Nothing Fancy

And that brings us to the parlor. I recall hearing, a few years ago, the apt simile, "As stiff as a convent parlor". By accident, rather than by intent, the furniture is sometimes a bit stiff and not too comfortable. When we consider, however, that the parlor is probably the least used room in a convent, and that the furniture is often a donation, we need not be surprised if the appointments leave much to be desired from the artistic standpoint.

In addition to the rooms mentioned, all convents include a laundry, a trunk room, a store room, and adequate bathing facilities.

But, we are sometimes asked, why are convents so often bleak and drab? Whether they are so or not depends, doesn't it, on the viewpoint? Often that is the way persons mistakenly regard our religious life, and so they tack the epithets "bleak and drab" on our convent homes. You have never seen a convent chapel that was bleak and drab, have you? Neither have I, and I have been in hundreds of chapels. Well, to nuns, the chapel *is* the convent. The rest of the building? Well, providing it is clean, the appearance of the rest of the building doesn't mean too much to any of us. How inconsistent we should be if we let architectural symmetry or period furniture constitute our happiness. But the furnishings are stuffy, you may protest. Some do protest, you know, even if you do not. Don't forget that ours is a life of self-denial. House furnishings are usually donated and beggars can't be choosers.

Cleanliness Counts

Our main consideration is that our convent be clean. Every nun is responsible for the cleanliness of a certain part of the convent. Every nun? Yes, each has an assigned task; as the result of her novitiate training, a nun is as ready to don an apron and scrub a floor as she is to teach a class. Each nun takes pride in doing well her share of the housekeeping in God's house. And when Christmas, Easter, Vow, and Anniversary Days come around, our joy expresses itself in attractive decorations not only in the chapel but throughout the rest of the convent.

Our tour of the inside over, let's see about those high walls that surround some convents. Frankly,

I've never lived behind a high wall or even a low one, but I have seen some walls. It may come as something of a shock to our well-meaning critics to learn that the walls are not for the purpose of keeping the nuns in but for keeping intruders out. No one can deny that nuns have a right in their convent to the privacy of their home, and may take any means they deem necessary to insure this privacy. Has it occurred to you that the walls surrounding some convents are merely a product of the architectural style in vogue when the convents were erected? On every side, you may see large estates surrounded by walls quite as high — (I venture this statement without a yardstick in hand!) — as those around any convent.

It seems strange to us that so many make so much over "convent walls." Perhaps the rumors still afloat about "convent walls" are a hangover from the time when a considerable number of books and tracts claiming to be the life stories of "ex-nuns" were rather widely circulated. In many cases, the women who wrote these stories, or permitted them to be written, had never been nuns. They had spent some time in a Convent of the Good Shepherd, but as wayward girls, not as nuns. There are Convents of the Good Shepherd in many large cities and they are uniformly surrounded by high walls as are other reformatories and correctional institutions. They are reformatories for delinquent girls conducted by nuns, and the inmates are usually committed to them by civil authorities.

So much for the walls. Whether or not nuns get enough to eat is really their own business, but since the question has been put to me, I may as well answer it here. We nuns are well-fed. The gaunt, hollow-cheeked, anemic individual just doesn't exist except in some morbid imaginations. In the Order to which I belong, and I believe my experience is typical of all nuns, Superiors realize that we cannot live a strenuous life of prayer and work unless we are properly nourished. So at our convent table, although the food is not fancy, a balanced diet is provided in abundance. Special treats in the line of food are always in order on special feasts and holidays.

Good Food

The question of food — and the Superiors alone have the responsibility of providing it and of paying the bills — quite naturally brings us to the matter of income. Just what revenue has a nun? She has no private income, let me assure you. The vow of poverty takes care of that. The monthly salary of a teaching nun — (and I am one) — runs between thirty-five and sixty-five dollars, a sum far below that which her professional preparation warrants. This entire salary goes to the Order, not to the nun herself; but on its part, the Order has the obligation of providing for all of its members, whether they be active, aged, or infirm.

It is this very donation of our services which constitutes the endowment of the Church. We nuns give no thought whatever to the matter of remuneration for our services. We take care of the sick, we teach, we do the other work for souls for the love of God, not for the sake of a salary.

Do nuns like their clothes? That is a question that often occurred to me as a girl. Maybe you, too, are wondering if nuns, like God's own penguins, like to dress in black and white. I believe I answer for all nuns when I reply that we all love our habits — as we call them — and are perfectly happy wearing them, no matter how strange they may look to others. There are natural advantages, even, to wearing a uniform. We save time by never having to decide what to wear, and we know that we are always in style — God's style.

Only a nun can know the deep joy of wearing a garb which sets her apart as a special friend of Christ. On our Clothing Day, every part of our dress was blessed at the altar; consequently, our garb is our holy habit. Our loving gratitude to God for being allowed to wear His livery prompts us to say a prayer as we don every article of dress. Each part of our religious garb is a symbol or a reminder of some phase of our life. My veil, for example, reminds me that I have given my heart to Christ, that for the sake of His love, I desire to avoid the admiration of all others.

My love for my garb, then, and the significance of every part of it prompts me to keep it clean and mended. Finally, my religious dress, which some may term funny, was worn by my foundress and many holy members of my Order, and so it is a constant reminder to me to strive to grow in the spirit of my Order, in the love of Christ and of the neighbor.

SHOW ME A HAPPIER FAMILY — if you can!

May I present my religious family? I'm proud of them and I would like you to see them through my eyes. First let me assure you that they are real women, every one of them. You see, in changing their garb, they did not alter their sex; they are truly feminine. With characteristic fastidiousness, nuns keep not only their convents but themselves spotless. They are, without doubt, the cleanest people I know. To mention but a few tasks, washing, mending, and pressing are routine jobs for every nun.

Nuns are orderly people, too. Just try leaving things around and you'd be told, ever so courteously but quite plainly, to put your things where they belong. The old saw, "A place for everything and everything in its place" finds literal fulfillment in every convent.

Because nuns are real women,

as I said at the start, they are kind, sympathetic, understanding. Let physical distress, worry, or any other trial afflict a nun and she will know at once the tenderness and Christ-like charity of her Sisters. The kindness my Sisters show you, they have first shown me.

Just because all wear the same garb, it should not be supposed for an instant that all my Sisters think alike. Quite the contrary. Each is a distinct personality, and individual, not a carbon copy of the next nun. A discussion of a book, or of a play, or even of a football game, for instance, is always interesting simply because there is free expression of ideas and, not infrequently, a sharp clash of opinion.

Each nun has her own mannerisms, her own little faults of character, for the simple reason that she is human. Take one little nun in my family. No matter how promptly she may move toward the chapel when the bell rings for prayers, she invariably comes in at the last minute, just a little out of breath as she kneels down in her place. Then there is the one who walks too fast and chirps her responses to the prayers just an instant ahead of the others. And there is the absent-minded nun who leaves her spectacles at school and apologetically, yet regularly, asks you to return to the school with her. But slow, fast, or absent-minded though they be, I love them all, these Sisters of mine. Don't they charitably put up with my numerous weaknesses and foibles?

Some of these nuns I know so well are gifted women, each of whom has been given the opportunity of cultivating her God-given talents. This one is a shark at math; that one handles science classes exceptionally well; a third is a splendid musician who can whip up a program in nothing flat. Each is a responsible person, not an automaton; consequently, each is given credit for being able to handle her assigned task satisfactorily and is allowed enough leeway to insure her having interest in her work.

We all love real people. You will love these Sisters of mine, for they are sincere. They are just what they appear to be; there is no masquerading, no hypocrisy. For a nun, who is so completely God's very own possession, the very idea of a double life is unthinkable.

And my Sisters, and all nuns as well, are idealists, perfectionists. Freely have they dedicated themselves to a life in which they continually strive for perfection, because of their strong love for Christ. This striving is a steady effort, not a thing of fits and starts. The vows of religion and the rules and constitutions of their Order keep nuns in there pitching all the time. With such a goal as perfec-

tion before them, the nuns I know are in earnest about their life. Their very obligations, freely contracted, make them take their life and their work seriously. Because they are interested in the "here" only in proportion to its usefulness in attaining the "hereafter", my Sisters logically cultivate not a worldly but rather an "other worldly" point of view.

Normal and Happy

That all sounds very serious, and it is. Yet I would not have you conclude that this concentration on things spiritual has made sobersides of my Sisters. In our life, as in everyone's life, a certain amount of relaxation is necessary to safeguard mental health. And so our community recreation periods are delightfully gay. Closeness to God results in a joyousness of spirit which find expression in relaxation unmarred by frivolity or worldliness.

Of all the satisfied persons in the world, I believe, honestly, that my Sisters top the list. A happiness born of inward satisfaction permeates their lives — expression, speech, manner. You have doubtless heard the old charge, that nuns are women who have been disappointed in love. Nothing is farther from the truth. My Sisters — and I include myself — were not left; they did the leaving. They understood what they were giving up, too, and willingly made the sacrifice. Furthermore, they do not, as so many people think, close their minds to the thought and the nobility of a generous life in the world, of marriage, home, family. The thought of all this might be, indeed, very appealing; but the nun well knows that real love is principally a giving, not a getting. She chooses, because of her love for Christ, to give all she is and has to God.

My Sisters live a life of self-denial, but so does everyone else, to some extent, at any rate. What office worker can sleep as long as she likes? What lay teacher can report for her classes when she chooses? And who can estimate the amount of self-denial that enters into the life of the mother of an average family. Everyone else has to deny herself. Why not the nun, who, by her very profession, announces to the world that she aspires to resemble her crucified Lover and so is prepared to take up her cross daily? In their very giving, my Sisters know the joy of sacrifice. They realize — and this is important — that they have freely made a sacrifice of certain joys and pleasures which many persons, for one reason or another, are compelled to forego.

And so it is correct to say that one source of the deep content which floods the hearts and souls of my Sisters is the total absence of emotional conflict. With charming poise and self-possession, they go about their daily work. They have all that they want from life; they are content. They do not need nor want any sympathy.

And This Is Our Reward!

Volumes have been written on the advantages of a nun's religious life and there is still more to be said. One of the most obvious is the utter security which it brings. In the midst of world upheavals and stock market crashes, nuns enjoy freedom from financial worry. If a new wing has to be erected, or a fire-gutted building has to be replaced, only the Superiors need be concerned about the finances.

A second natural advantage of our life, and a very real one, is the perfect old-age security that it insures. In illness and in old age, we receive the best possible care; indeed, the very knowing this is a potent factor in preserving our mental health. In illness, sorrow, worry, disappointments, misunderstandings and trials, which are inseparable from every life, we nuns can count on the powerful support of sisterly kindness and understanding.

Steady work is another advantage we nuns enjoy. A nun finds deep satsifaction in knowing that, as long as she is able, she will always have a definite job assigned to her. In every convent, there is plenty of work to be done, of one kind or another. Superiors try to assign a Sister work for which she is not only fitted but for which she has a liking. Do we not do best the things that we enjoy doing?

For all of us nuns, our community is a source of very real help and happiness. For each of us, this group takes the place of the family life we have denied ourselves. We draw spiritual support and strength from the good example all around us. All in a community have the same aim — the pursuit of holiness — and this common purpose serves as a sympathetic bond uniting all. Around us are gathered models of every virtue; from one, we learn humility, from another, patience, from a third, obedience.

Daily striving to become a champion for Christ brings great peace of soul — not a small advantage of our religious life. Daily examination of conscience and weekly confession empty the soul that God may fill it. By cultivating a right sense of values, we nuns come to find deep joy in spiritual things. The more a nun gives herself to God, the more does He give Himself to her, and this is pure joy. Compare with this joy of union with God, we deem as nothing the pleasures we have freely renounced. Day in and day out we know that we are living our lives as we have elected to live them, in conformity with the Will of God. For a nun there is little disillusionment, as there so often is for many in other states of life. We nuns knew what kind of life would be ours when we joined the Order. By that, I do not mean that we foresaw every individual trial that would become to us; but I mean that we knew ours would be a life of self-denial, and we freely embraced that life. We also know that as nuns we can help our neighbor

more than would have been possible had we remained outside the convent.

There is among nuns a spirit of generosity which rules out constant "griping" when extra work, for example, falls to their share. Thus it is that the inward calm that we nuns experience is outwardly manifested by a serene, cheerful bearing. On the whole, we nuns have a keen sense of humor. We need it to take gracefully the teasing that is a definite part of the give and take of community life. Those who think the thoughts of Christ, speak His words and do His works, show by their calm exterior that they deem it an honor to keep a home for Christ, to be associated with Him in the noblest work possible — that of helping Him to save the souls for which He died.

Certainly the prospect of a happy death may be classed as an advantage of religious life, and we nuns hope for just that. Daily meditation on the shortness of life convinces us that death is not the end, but rather the very important beginning of our real life with God. Urged on by this conviction, we point all our spiritual efforts to one end, that of dying well. Passing worldly events are robbed of their importance by comparison with everlasting spiritual considerations. Many persons push the thought of death into the background; we nuns encourage the thought and daily pray for the grace of dying well. Have we not seen our fellow religious full of peace and hope? And we have every reason to expect the same grace from God's liberality if we persevere in loving Him.

Concerning the reward awaiting us, there is no doubt in our hearts. We have Christ's own words for it. "And everyone who has left house, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall possess life everlasting." (Matt. XIX:29). By a special grace of God we nuns have understood that fundamental, all-important lesson of our Catholic Faith, that man is created by God to know, love, and serve Him in this life, and be happy with Him forever in the next. Thanks to God's help, we early came to realize that God alone could satisfy our hearts. We cut ourselves off from human love in order to free our hearts for love divine. Our life on earth has been a daily struggle, a reaching out toward God. After oh, so short a time, which we call life, God will satisfy, as He alone can, the longings of our hearts for perfect union with Him. This is the payoff — Heaven!

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